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Habits, Aesthetics and Normativity

Alessandro Bertinetto
Università dgli Studi di Torino
alessandro.bertinetto@unito.it

Abstract. This article explores the role of habits in shaping aesthetic normativity. It asserts that standards of value within aesthetic agency are not immutable, objective criteria detached from personal engagement in appreciation and creation, nor should they be reduced to mere individual subjective pleasure. The former stance fails to consider the essential expressivity and creativity at the heart of aesthetic practices, while the latter overlooks the normative framework that underpins the significance, validity, and quality of aesthetic agency. This framework is represented in the established rules of taste, the need for aesthetic education, and the dynamics of aesthetic disagreements.
Consequently, effective aesthetic normativity requires a balance: practices must be organized structurally around values that are, to a certain degree, communally shared, yet flexible enough to incorporate the expressive creativity of individual appreciation. This article contributes a nuanced explanation of aesthetic normativity by elucidating the impact of habits on aesthetic practices.

Keywords. Aesthetics, habits, normativity, aesthetic experience, philosophy of art, practices.

1. *Introduction. The dilemma of aesthetic normativity*

Aesthetic normativity concerns the manner in which one ought to act aesthetically, as well as

the rationales for aesthetic practices, including both aesthetic and artistic production and aesthetic appreciation[1]. The pivotal questions of aesthetic normativity are which norms and reasons guide aesthetic agency, perception, appreciation and judgment, both in the artistic realm and in everyday practices, as well as how they operate; what their origin is; and how they are established, enforced, and sustained.

Such issues emerge, for instance, in the face of aesthetic disagreement, when an object, like a work of art, is subject to divergent aesthetic evaluations, or when painters' styles are confronted with the criteria of a pictorial tradition, or when musicians ponder the extent to which they should comply with conventions in musical performance. These situations are also common in daily life, such as when deciding where and how to place a picture on a wall (see Wittgenstein [2007]: 1-40): when one makes aesthetic choices, such as how to decorate living space, personal preferences are contrasted with those of other people as well as with the prevailing style of decoration in a housing culture.

On the one hand, one might posit that in the aesthetic domain, unlike the cognitive realm, it is not feasible to identify universally valid principles for organizing experience and judgment: rather, «beauty lies in what pleases», suggesting that the measure of aesthetic value and the guide for aesthetic agency is the individual's pleasure. On the other hand, it seems that individual pleasure is not a reliable guide and that within aesthetic practices there must exist objective validity criteria to which one's experiences and judgments must conform. But how can the creative and expressive dimension of aesthetic behavior driven by pleasure be reconciliated with the normative requirement?

It appears that we are faced with a dilemma. Considering pleasure as the source of aesthetic value seems to preclude the normativity of the aesthetic sphere; yet, regarding rule-following as the fundamental criterion for proper participation in a practice seems to neglect the role of appreciation and deprive normative practice of its aesthetic character. A solution to this dilemma could be to consider the appreciative/hedonic dimension of aesthetic experiences as a contribution to the shaping of the normativity of aesthetic practices[2]. Thus, the normative dimension of aesthetic practices should not be understood as mere conformity to established objective norms, but as the articulation of a normative order through the very exercise of aesthetic agency in artistic and everyday practices.

The point of aesthetic normativity is not just the correctness of one's behavior in relation to the norms of a practice, but also, and above all, the contribution that different types of aesthetic agency make to the (trans)formation of aesthetic normativity. In this vein, according to Gorodeisky (2021a; 2021b), the normativity of aesthetic practices relies on the aesthetic value produced by appreciative enjoyment. This can be understood as the pleasure deriving from savoring the personal engagement in an activity (Nguyen [2019]). Therefore, aesthetic agents exercise a degree of freedom concerning aesthetic norms: although individual

aesthetic behavior is organized and guided by the norms of aesthetic practices, agents may have reasons to alter them (see Kubala [2020]). In other words, those who participate in an aesthetic practice do so appreciatively: they do not blindly follow the norm as a mechanical rule that must be matched by one's behavior, actions, or works. Instead, the norm is adapted to the specific case by practitioners, thereby becoming an expression of their aesthetic agency and sensibility.

To sum up, in the aesthetic realm it seems crucial to acknowledge that aesthetic agents, who participate in a normative practice, do not merely follow the rules more or less well, but contribute, through their behavior and works, to shaping the practice itself. To illustrate with an artistic example, a painter is not an impressionist simply because they adhere to the typical characteristics of Impressionism – such as: emphasis on light and color, outdoor painting (plein air), everyday ordinary subjects (rather than historical or mythological scenes), use of pure colors, absence of sharp outlines, visible and rapid brushstrokes, focus on overall effect (not on details) –, but because they help shape and articulate these norms through their paintings. Nonetheless, a recognizable formal, technical, narrative, expressive, etc., organization guides the aesthetic agency of those participating in the practice, establishing differences with other aesthetic practices and artistic genres (for example, the differences between Impressionism and Cubism).

Aesthetic agency's standards of value are neither unchanging objective criteria detached from autonomous personal appreciative engagement and practical application, nor can they be simply equated with the subjective enjoyment of an individual. In point of fact, in the first case, the significant role that the expressive nature of aesthetic practices, and ultimately their inherent aesthetic quality, plays would be overlooked, while, in the second case, one would fail to recognize the normative aspect that is intrinsic to the relevance, validity, and quality of aesthetic agency, as it is particularly evident in the rules of taste and style characteristic of the various aesthetic and artistic practices (including ephemeral ones like fashion), in the social need for aesthetic education, and in instances of aesthetic disagreement.

My suggestion is that to understand the possibility and functioning of normativity in the aesthetic domain, which requires compatibility between the organizational structure of a practice based on (more or less) shareable values and the expressive creativity of individual appreciation, we must clarify the role that habit plays in aesthetic practices.

2. *The habitual core of aesthetic normativity*

There is an obvious way in which habits are linked to aesthetic normativity. In fact, one can have good or bad aesthetic habits, that is, habits that comply

(well), badly or do not comply at all with normative criteria of aesthetic value commonly shared by participants in an aesthetic (including artistic) practices. Accordingly, in reference to specific aesthetic practices – such as e.g. clothing fashion, avant-garde painting, cuisine, gardening, free musical improvisation, techno music, ceramics, and urban furnishings – those with good aesthetic habits tend to respect the aesthetic normativity of the relevant practices: they have good taste and/or style; those who do not have good aesthetic habits have bad taste/style (or have no taste/style at all) and violate the normative aesthetic norms of the practice.

A person might be considered to have poor taste in cooking if they indiscriminately mix flavors that clash or use ingredients of low quality, resulting in meals that are unpalatable or poorly presented. A gardener may reflect poor taste if they allow the garden to become overgrown, cluttered with ornaments that do not harmonize, or feature plant combinations that do not complement each other in color, form, or function. However, in a community accustomed to the English garden, a formal garden organization that is very geometrically precise – like in the French garden – would be out of place, possibly resulting in an unpleasant appearance. In painting, poor taste might be displayed by an artist who uses garish, conflicting hues without purpose, or whose subjects and motifs are trite or devoid of technical proficiency. Sartorial choices characterized by ill-fitting garments, incongruous patterns and colors, or adherence to unflattering trends might similarly be indicative of deficient taste in fashion. A film or video might show poor taste through clumsy special effects, overacting, or a plot that is riddled with holes or relies on stereotypes.

In all these exemplary cases, what is aesthetically right (or acceptable) or wrong (and unacceptable) seems ultimately to depend on the habits of the aesthetic practices in question. Thus, performing recognizable melodies would be acceptable in a practice of singing popular songs together, while within the context of an atonal and noise-based free improvisation performance it could be interpreted as a transgression of the customs defining the artistic practice. And yet, in certain cases, what goes against common taste can manifest an original style, i.e. characteristic individual aesthetic habits that may be appealing for its extravagance or its capacity to innovate a practice based on aesthetic habits perceived as stifling or outdated. Indeed, as Adorno (1955) elucidates, even *Neue Musik* (new music) can rapidly age: excessive replication of novelty swiftly renders it clichéd. Going beyond or against the cliché, by habitually adopting different aesthetic attitudes, can result in a virtuous contribution to the articulation of a felicitous normativity of an aesthetic practice.

Thus habits shape shared aesthetic practices, regulating the goodness or badness of individuals' taste in reference to the normative aesthetic profile of an aesthetic practice. Yet, habits may also sculpt the unique aesthetic style of a

participant in an aesthetic practice – possibly manifesting as mere eccentricity or inappropriateness, or alternatively as creative originality and innovation – and can establish aesthetic models, which may either be revered as sacrosanct or perceived as stagnant, frayed, and suffocating.

Therefore, the thesis that I aim to defend in this article is that habits play a constitutive role in the articulation of aesthetic normativity. Habits are (embodied) patterns of behavior that shape, organize and norm aesthetic practices. Furthermore, since habits are enacted through contextual interactions between the organism and its environment, and evolve through these situated interactions, the aesthetic normativity constituted and regulated by aesthetic habits is situated as well: it is negotiated through the situations in which aesthetic practices are carried out.

Hence, as I contend, habits organize and structure the aesthetic experience of individuals; yet, this organization has, from the outset, a social character and entails a normative dimension that enables the creative dimension of the aesthetic experience, rather than necessarily excluding it. In this sense, the notion of the habit plays a crucial role for understanding the specific dimension of the normativity of aesthetic practices.

Against this view, it may be objected that habit, far from fostering aesthetic experience, hinders it. However, I have already addressed this potential objection (Bertinetto [2024]) by arguing that, while mechanical habits may hinder aesthetic experience, virtues and intelligent aesthetic habits – those shaping aesthetic styles of perception, appreciation, and aesthetic agency and capable of adapting to situational specifics – are essential for aesthetic experience. Furthermore, the (meta)habit of improvisationally transforming habits, which is at the core of habit formation, is inherently aesthetic. Yet, one may raise the further objection that habit, far from normatively organizing the experience, is incompatible with normativity. Therefore, to argue that habit can resolve the problem of aesthetic normativity, it is not sufficient to clarify that the aesthetic experience is not hindered by habit. It must also be explained that even in the aesthetic domain, habitual behavior is not in conflict with acting according to norms and values. This is the philosophical work I aim to undertake in this article.

3. *Aesthetic habits, niches and situated normativity*

Habits are essential to human life, and this holds true for aesthetic experiences as well. As I have discussed in Bertinetto (2024), aesthetic practices are shaped by plastic patterns of perception, imagination, emotion, cognition, and action – what can be termed as «aesthetic habits». These habits are cultivated through frequent engagement with a wide range of aesthetic activities, not just art, and

are crucial in organizing and facilitating these endeavors. They nurture aesthetic sensibility/sensitivity[3] and attentiveness and this, in turn, affects stylistic expressiveness as well as aesthetic enjoyment, appreciation, and creativity. As these habits are activated, they undergo refinement and transformation, influencing not only artistic and performance skills but also shaping aesthetic preferences and expectations in daily life, such as in fashion, cuisine, decoration, and travel.

Accordingly, aesthetic habits play a foundational role in structuring – or scaffolding – the aesthetic lives of individuals and societies, enabling and regulating aesthetic experiences. These habits, which are integral to aesthetic practices across varied cultures, shape «aesthetic niches»[4] – the cultural-natural contexts or habitats where individuals enact their aesthetic behaviors, form their preferences, and hone their abilities and sensitivities in the diverse areas of aesthetic agency (Portera [2020; 2021]). The specific and situated practice of aesthetic agency, in turn, contributes to the ongoing formation and transformation of these habits.

Arguably, this organization of aesthetic experience and agency through the formation of aesthetic habits that structure specific aesthetic environments (niches) carries normative weight. This is because habitual patterns are appreciated as values – whether positive or negative – that regulate the dynamic system of historical-cultural expectations and preferences known as taste.

Therefore, the aesthetic norms governing various practices, including the concepts that denote aesthetic or artistic properties and criteria for agency, appreciation, and evaluation – such as elegant, sentimental, graceful, delicate, robust, dainty, garish, brilliant[5] – can be comprehended in terms of habits: individual and social habits organizing and guiding aesthetic perception, appreciation, and production and providing standards for aesthetic judgment and art criticism. As such, they do not ground aesthetic practices from the outside but are themselves integral parts of their dynamics. They regulate aesthetic behavior, but aesthetic agency in concrete situations reshapes them.

In this context, aesthetic habits may be regarded as embodied norms that guide aesthetic agency, manifesting in individual tendencies and dispositions. These habits sculpt the distinctive qualities of behavior, values, and preferences that characterize personal expressive styles and tastes. Furthermore, these habits play a critical role in the social coordination of aesthetic practices, influencing styles, genres, aesthetic concepts and shaping collective preferences. Both individually and socially, the practice of aesthetic agency impacts and feeds back on these habits, influencing their normative significance. Thus, the normative value of aesthetic behavior, directed by the habits that define aesthetic niches, is in a constant process of negotiation through the performance of aesthetic practices. Such practices contribute to continuously reshaping aesthetic habits, in response to specific situations and environmental affordances (Chemero [2003]).

The fact that aesthetic habits unite social groups in the pursuit and articulation of specific aesthetic values explains the normative constraints of aesthetic practices. However, since habits evolve and can change over time based on their enactment in specific situations, this also accounts for the historical shifts in taste and aesthetic practices. Furthermore, the existence of different habits among various social groups, and the potential divergence between social and individual habits, elucidates the conflicts that arise in judgments of taste.

Individual and social aesthetic habits interact and shape one another. People are influenced by their personal aesthetic habits and the collective habits associated with the practices they engage in. Over time, these practices evolve through the aesthetic actions of individuals. For instance, the decision to adhere to an aesthetic norm – like ending a musical piece in a minor key with a Picardy mayor third (as discussed by Kubala [2020]) – is actively negotiated within musical practice. Modern listening habits may favor ending with a minor third, breaking from the traditional norm, while a musician might choose to honor the historical convention, challenging contemporary stylistic trends.

Therefore, aesthetic habits or norms are directed by what is valued as aesthetically superior in each particular situation. Such choices can create divergences between individual and social habits or norms, influencing their (trans)formation. They also highlight variances among different social norms that underpin aesthetic appreciation and guide decisions in aesthetic creation and evaluation. Moreover, these choices also reveal the reasons and motivations for selecting one aesthetic direction over another.

Thus, my argument regarding the role of habits in aesthetic normativity can be summarized as follows. Firstly, the pleasure derived from aesthetic appreciation is inherently connected to the situated and appreciative enactment of aesthetic habits, which are normative within the framework of aesthetic practices. Such pleasure is pivotal in establishing and reinforcing an aesthetic habit (Bertinetto [2023; 2024]). Secondly, the value and significance of aesthetic practices are rooted in the context of aesthetic niches that habitually structure and guide the choices and preferences of individuals, social collectives, and cultural entities. Engagement in these practices is justified by this inherent value: when coupled with the pleasure derived from associated aesthetic experiences, this value provides a strong reason to pursue excellence within those practices. Consequently, aesthetic values are concretely negotiated through the situated activation of appreciative behavior within a specific context, guided by one's ingrained aesthetic habits and sensitivities. This dynamic explains the motivations behind individual engagement in aesthetic practices – both within and beyond the realm of art – and captures the fluid, dynamic, evolving, and permeable nature of these practices. As I contend, this interplay is the root and the backbone of aesthetic normativity[6].

4. *Habits and normativity: a problematic relation*

As mentioned at the end of Section 2, the argument just presented regarding the role of habits in aesthetic normativity can, however, be subject to a rather strong objection. Indeed, it seems that habits cannot be considered as normative reasons for acting.

To make a long story short, it can be surely argued, first, that habits are embodied norms of action (Peirce [1931]; Massecar [2016]: 54, 59; Menary [2020]), i.e., dispositions to act that can be followed better or worse, and, second, that –as defended by philosophers such as Aristotle, Montaigne, and William James, among others (Piazza [2018]; Sparrow, Hutchinson [2013]) – habits organize and preserve society, because they anchor individuals in the context of a shared common sense with respect to the values that govern forms of social life. Hence, arguably, norms can be effective when they are embodied in habits.

Nonetheless, it seems that habits, as such, are not normative for two reasons:

(1) it is the practice that is normative (i.e.: good or bad), not the habit that conveys it;

(2) habitual action is not voluntary, thus it is not free and therefore it is normatively irrelevant (Hartmann [2003]: 154).

Accordingly, one would simply engage in behaviors deemed as customs and habits, adhering to them on the grounds that «it is done this way» (Delacroix [2022]). Habits would elude any rational articulation and its normativity would merely be the «normality» of behavior (Salaverría [2007]: 235)[7].

Under such circumstances, habits would passively mirror the banality of conventional wisdom inherent in socially and culturally governed everyday behaviors, including those underlying aesthetic and artistic experiences. Although education can preform habits to the exercise of virtuous practices (e.g., it can educate against contracting habits of racism or homophobia, or bad aesthetic taste), the normative value seems extrinsic to the habit. Habits seem to constrain freedom and to involve both a compulsion to mechanical repetition of patterns of action and thought absorbed as taken for granted and an escape from rational deliberation. Thusly conceived, habits seem to be obstacles to the exercise of normative practices: they do not organise behavior as rationally processed norms, but rather as physical-mechanic constraints. This seems to contradict the idea that it is precisely the habitual nature of practice which holds aesthetic normative value.

Yet, the issue does not seem to be so clearly resolvable. First, understanding habits exclusively as social customs/consuetudes or unreflective individual abilities, as such opposed to (reflexive) virtues, does not seem to be entirely appropriate. Individuals inherit habits from the social contexts in which they are embedded from birth and their self-identity gradually emerges from those

inherited habits (Dreon [2022]: 123). In this sense, habits scaffold the cultural environments (niches) in which individuals develop. However, habits are then transformed by those who activate them in their situation, thereby impacting and possibly transforming their niches. Habit, according to a Deweyan conception, ensues from the mutual shaping of organisms and their environments (Dreon [2022]: 110). Accordingly, it is also inappropriate to claim that habit is only individual and as such contrasts with the social dimension of rules and conventions.

Moreover, the acquisition of habits is not necessarily normatively neutral (Hartmann [2003]: 150): as I have argued elsewhere (Bertinetto [2024]), habit is not necessarily (only) a mechanism that, as such, blocks and prevents attention to the relevant aspects of a situation, thereby constituting a problem for normativity. Habits cannot be reduced to mechanical routines and skills. Habits organize our experience by responding to what is happening in the environment. And, as such, precisely their organizing power can be evaluated as normative, in the sense of fostering a good life (Di Paolo et al. [2017]; Ramírez-Vizcaya, Froese [2019]).

However, this general attribution of normativity to habits has the defect of being too general. If one were to follow it all the way, it would lead to the exclusion of bad habits and unrighteous customs, while on the contrary, bad habits and corrupt customs exist. This is also true in the area of aesthetics, where one can certainly speak, e.g., of corrupt taste and pompous or mediocre style: customs, habits, styles are not in themselves good or beautiful. The relationship between habits and normativity is therefore much more complex, and also much more interesting. Resorting to Hartmann ([2003]: 193 ff.) and Delacroix (2022), we can identify six ways to articulate the normativity of habits, assuming that what applies in general also applies to aesthetic habits:

(1) acquired habits preform decision-making attitudes and behaviors: by contracting habits not only reactively, but also proactively, individuals build their character positively or negatively;

(2) the habituation process of practices and behaviors also involves the absorption of norms, which involves the adaptation of the norm to the individual and his or her situation;

(3) habits of good practice are good: the normative value of the practice in question is transmitted to the corresponding habit;

(4) although habits are not (abstract) norms on the ontological level, neither are they mere natural instincts; rather, even in their repetitive regularity, they have a practical-cultural dimension (and are a *second nature*, as defended by a venerable philosophical tradition; see Rath (1996): therefore, habits can acquire normative significance when they constitute a substantial part of the projects – intentional and grounded in reasons (always put to the test of the situation) – that organize practices and actions (Cavell [1979])[8].

According to 1-4, habits are normative with respect to the actions that rely on them: they link, organize, and direct actions in ways that are compatible with and functional for human projects and practices (Levine [2012]: 248-272).

(5) Moreover, the very distinction, between mechanized (rigid) routines and intelligent (plastic) habits (Dewey [1922]: 70 ff.), already implies a normative evaluation: intelligent habits, in fact, are normatively better than merely mechanical ones, because they can modify themselves to be more effective in their organization of existence;

(6) finally, and importantly, normativity functions effectively when the relevance of norms, recognizable and appreciable through the practice of a (meta)habit of responsiveness and attentiveness to the concrete demands of the situation (Magrì [2019]) – a (meta)habit which is crucial for the virtuous functioning of every habit –, is experienced in relation to specific contexts.

This last point deserves to be briefly discussed, not least because it is highly relevant with regard to the relationship between habits, on the one hand, and aesthetic experiences and practices, on the other hand.

5. *Habits' Role For Situated Aesthetic Normativity*

Although norms can become objectified in institutions, designed to regulate individual behavior from the outside, or in mandates, to which one is expected to comply, the reasons why human practices are normative is arguably as follows. Actions and perceptions are interventions in the socio-natural/material environment that are sensible/sensitive to normative corrections and demand approval/disapproval regarding one's own and others' conduct. Successful social interaction requires gauging others' reactions against shared values, which depends on the implicit duty to comply with expectations. Hence, social interaction inherently possesses a normative character, founded on shared behavioral customs, i.e. on habits as «normative patterned practices [that] spread out over a group and […] are acquired by learning from others» (Menary [2020]: 314). Yet, criteria for the appropriateness/inappropriateness of behavior cannot be taken as universally valid, but are negotiated relative to the needs of the situation. Individuals do not act according to pre-determined norms received as external obligations, but are inclined to tailor their normative orientation to their perception of what the situation demands (see Frega [2015]; Boncompagni [2020]). It is mutual engagement, depending on the ability to interpret others' reactions with respect to the regularity of a shared system of values and on feedback effects that the functioning of a normative order produces upon the order itself, prompting continuous change and adjustment according to the action's requirements, that generates the normativity of practice (also facilitated by the reparation of actions deemed wrong).

This underpins the argument for the situatedness of the normativity of human practices (Van den Herik, Rietveld [2021]): norms do not merely underlie behavior, but are accessible to agents for the regulation of individual and social conduct in concrete situations, that is, they are internal to the practices themselves. Thus, institutional normativity is concretely realized through the fluidity of practices in which participants negotiate the normative values of their aesthetic agency in the course of their own creative and appreciative actions (see Bertinetto, Bertram [2020]). Normative behavior is not merely about complying (to varying degrees, more or less effectively) with the norms of a practice as foundational rules. Rather, it entails the articulation of practice norms through appreciative response and a commitment to sensible/sensitive attentiveness to the situation. This commitment nurtures an attunement with the social-natural environment, fostering active and creative engagement in the normativity of practices. Norms are learned, absorbed as habits, and collectively articulated by individuals according to the opportunities/appropriateness of concrete situations. Norms are negotiated within the practices they help to structure. They function effectively and smoothly when they are embodied in social customs and ingrained in habitual behaviors, becoming action dispositions that can flexibly evolve and adapt through interaction with the environment (see Zhok [2014]). Certainly, even in the aesthetic and artistic realm, the norms that regulate human practices are objectified in institutions acquiring a certain rigidity; however, their application requires the capacity to accommodate the unpredictable concreteness of the specific situation to which they must be adapted.

Therefore, the normative felicitousness of a habit hinges on the careful perception and appreciation of its relevance and suitability to the specific situation in which it is enacted. Should a norm (and its corresponding habitual behavior) prove unsuitable for a particular context, it ought to be altered or abandoned: habits of attention enable us to discern the (in)appropriateness of «normal» habitual actions, and this awareness prompts the alteration of the normative status quo[9]. Importantly, just as the (trans)formation of habits is an aspect of their functioning as habits, in many cases reflection on the validity of practical norms[10] does not take place outside of practice, but is part of these practices themselves: it is an engaged contribution to these practices, which (re)negotiates the norm through an appreciation of the (appropriateness of the) norm within the specific situation, possibly reorganizing the practice accordingly.

Therefore, the normative suitability of habits requires rejuvenating our practices and behaviors by developing the aforementioned (meta)habit of attention and sensibility to the situational context of one's actions. That is, ensuring that this (meta)habit of attentiveness – which, as can be argued (Bertinetto [2023]), is also at the root of the formation of the habit itself – is integrated into all habits. Habitual behavior expresses normativity through the exercise of habits as a dis-

cernment of appropriateness regarding the activation of an attitude in a specific circumstance. If the action to which one is accustomed does not suit the particular moment or situation, it is prudent to adapt the behavior accordingly. Hence, the normative validity of habits cannot be comprehended in the abstract; it must be attuned to the context (see Landweer [2012]). It follows that as intelligent dispositions to act, habits enable transformations to adequately respond to specific environmental affordances.

These reflections on the habitual character of norms, the normative aspect of habits, and the relationship between habitual normative validity and respect for/responsiveness to/resonance with the specificity of the situation apply, a fortiori, to aesthetic experience as well.

On the one hand, the ability to savor and taste the normative goodness of a behavioral pattern or a custom in the concrete case and to transform it creatively, if needed, by plastically adapting it to the (more or less expected) situational affordance, is per se an aesthetic type of sensitvity. It is a kind of style (of life: see Shusterman et al. [2012]), consisting in the cultivated disposition to respond to unexpected novelty, (trans)forming itself appropriately. Which suggests that normative practices inherently demand the cultivation of aesthetic taste. In other words, the effective functioning of a virtuous normative practice, shaped and sustained by good habits, carries an aesthetic quality. By fostering a resonant engagement with the environment and others, it yields satisfaction and self-esteem, as well as garnering the approval of others; thus, the dynamics of normative practices engage agents in a communal consensus, the aesthetic aspect of which echoes Kant's notion of taste as «common sense»: a sensibility or a sentiment for the shareability of the own' appreciative experience (Kant [1790]: 68-71, 123-125; Bertinetto [2022]: 147-157).

On the other hand, the fact that the norms governing aesthetic practices should be understood as (constituted and nurtured by) behavioral habits (perceptual, affective, cognitive, etc.) concretely negotiated by the participants, implies that they are not abstract and merely mechanical routines, but – according to the Deweyan conception of intelligent, sensitive, artistic, flexible, i.e. virtuous habits (Dewey [1922]: 28, 71-77) – forms of organizing experience guided by the (meta)habit of situational attentiveness and, therefore, potentially (trans)formed by the way they are activated in concrete situations. Accordingly, the way in which habits organize different aesthetic niches thus constitutes the basis of aesthetic normativity. This explains, firstly, both the need for sharing claimed by the individual's aesthetic experiences and judgments (i.e., the claim to general validity of the judgment of taste, crucial to the Kantian theory of the *sensus communis*) and the need to engage personally in matters of aesthetics (in fact, the point is not to attain information about a phenomenon or object, but rather to be involved in and "resonate with" it), and, secondly, both the aesthetic agreement

within communities of taste and the aesthetic disagreement between different communities of taste and even within the same community (in fact, everyone activates aesthetic habits individually).

Of course, aesthetic normativity is generated also by the cognitive and pedagogical technologies we absorb in our involvement within particular artistic and, more generally, aesthetic niches. For example, we learn the concept of «ballet» by learning (thanks to epistemic and pedagogical technologies) sets of subsidiary concepts – piruetta, jeté, tendu… – that regulate particular actions within ballet (Richards [2022]: 118 ff); and we incorporate those concepts as behavioral habits also thanks to the collective acceptance of aesthetic habits as rules of the relevant aesthetic practice, endowed with «deontic powers» (which establish what is allowed, what is obligatory and what is forbidden: see Searle [2010]), perhaps supported by institutions (in the specific case for example ballet schools and academies) that legitimize the habitual activities at issues by structuring their normativity. Nonetheless, the concrete normativity of aesthetic practices functions thanks to habitual attitudes of participants, including appreciators and critics. Moreover, it is sensible/sensitive adaptation to specific situations that shapes the way aesthetic habits configure their normative value for aesthetic practices: through the approval and disapproval of teachers, appreciators, critics and other participants, as well as through our own affective response, we not only learn, but also develop, the normative character of an aesthetic practice.

The normativity of aesthetic practices is complicate and fluid. Each individual usually participates in different aesthetic niches, and these are porous, being able to influence each other. Moreover, the normativity of practices is also influenced by the individual preferences of individuals within the same niche, which, in turn, may depend on reasons of various kinds: pleasure, emotions, knowledge, politics, money… Contrary to what Richards ([2022]: 127) claims, individual preferences do not articulate a normativity independent of the normativity operating withing their aesthetic niches: our preferences and taste, in fact, are not independent of the habits, conventions, and aesthetic norms that govern the aesthetic niches in which we operate. Rather, individual preferences activate the normativity of niches situatively, that is, by adapting the normative habit to the specific situation in which the individual operates, and this contributes to (trans)forming the normative habit itself.

In the realm of aesthetics, the normative aspect of a practice must be reconcilable with its potential for creative development. The possibility of this reconciliation is provided by resorting to the notion of habit (or custom): in fact, habit is capable of harmonizing normative regularity with adaptiveness, plasticity and creativity of behavior. Not only does this support the notion that acquiring a habit activates an aesthetic sensibility/sensitivity, but it also suggests that aesthetic normativity is produced within the actual processes of aesthetic (and artistic)

creation and appreciation that are regulated by habits that can flexibly adapt and respond to specific situations. In essence, habits provide an explanation for the normative dimensions of aesthetics and, conversely, the aesthetic dimensions of normativity as such.

6. *Conclusion*

In this article, I have argued that the dilemma of aesthetic normativity can be grasped and resolved through the concept of habit, a cornerstone of human behavior. In another article (Bertinetto [2024]), I contended that habit does not conflict with the dimensions of creative and hedonic freedom intrinsic to aesthetic experience. Here I have endeavored to demonstrate that habit also aligns with the normative dimensions of human practices, a connection that is especially noteworthy within the aesthetic realm. Habits – both social and individual – scaffold aesthetic niches, shaping our aesthetic capacities and preferences into aesthetic habits. Furthermore, the concept of habit provides insight into critical aspects of normatively regulated action and underscores the situatedness of normativity, which itself bears an aesthetic dimension. Indeed, a good (intelligent, virtuous) habit includes an aesthetic sensibility/sensitivity, embodied in the (meta)habit of attentiveness and responsiveness to context. This sensibility/sensitivity, a function of the habit's attunement to situational contingencies and demands, allows the normative goodness of our behavior to be appreciatively assessed in terms of appropriateness. This is particularly true in the realm of aesthetic practices and experiences, which are not only organized by networks of aesthetic habits but also require a nuanced sensibility/sensitivity to the specifics of each case and situation – what is traditionally known as (good) taste. Cultivating this aesthetic sensibility/sensitivity as a habit, one that involves wisely improvising behavior to meet the demands of the moment is crucial (Portera [2023]; Bertinetto [2024]). This ability to adapt and respond, which lies at the heart of aesthetic normativity, plays an essential role in our aesthetic engagement with art and beyond[11].

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Notes

1 An aesthetic practice can be defined as a kind of social practice that is concerned with aesthetic experiences and values. In turn a social practice can be defined as «a shared form of activity partially constituted by norms that govern roles, actions, and attitudes» (Kubala [2021]: 411).

2 This can be considered a Kantian/Wittgensteinian proposal: see Feloj (2020) and Appelqvist (2023) for detailed discussions of, respectively, Kant's and Wittgenstein's takes on aesthetic normativity.

3 I use this composite expression to indicate that a good habit involves an awareness and responsiveness to aesthetic details and nuances (and is thus aesthetically sensitive), but this is also a practical capacity to respond judiciously to the aesthetic context (sensibility).

4 According to the Niche Construction Theory – developed by John Odling-Smee, Marc Feldman, and Kevin Laland – organisms are not passive entities in the face of natural selection. On the contrary, they modify their ecological niche, influencing the selection process. Organisms co-direct their evolution by modifying their environment. This modified ecological niche is never static, but always *becoming* with the species that inhabit it, and it is inherited. In the case of more complex species like Homo sapiens, the modified environment is never only natural, but also social and cultural (see Pertile [2020]). The aesthetic niche, then, is a specific dimension of human beings' culturally modified environment: it provides individuals

aesthetic habits, while then individuals, through the activation and plastic adaptation of these habits, contribute to re-shaping their aesthetic niche.

5 On aesthetic concepts see Sibley (1959).

6 This argumentative strategy circumvents the difficulties encountered by both *hedonism* (for which variants, see Van der Berg [2020]) and Dom Lopes's *Network Theory* (Lopes [2018]). Hedonism regards pleasure as the source and/or justification for aesthetic value, underpinning aesthetic appreciation and judgment. Conversely, Network Theory proposes that the criterion for aesthetic agency should be located in acting in accordance with the norms of aesthetic practices. The primary criticism against Hedonism is that taking pleasure as the sole source of aesthetic value undermines the rational basis for of aesthetic normativity: it is impractical to establish aesthetic standards if the ultimate criterion is purely individual preference. A significant objection to Network Theory is that grounding aesthetic normativity on the accomplishments participants can achieve within specific practices does not relate to the aesthetic aspect of these practices: the value of the practices, and their normative force, is external to the aesthetic experience and appreciation of those participating in the practice. For a criticism to Lopes' Network Theory see Matravers (2021) (who, however, endorses hedonism for ethical reasons).

7 More radically Crossley (2014) argues that habit should be distinguished from both rule and convention. According to him, a habit cannot be applied correctly or incorrectly, which is instead a characteristic of a rule. A habit, on the other hand, can be good or bad, but in relation to a rule or criterion external to the habit. Moreover, a rule is social, while a habit is individual. Furthermore, Crossley thinks that even though a convention can take on a habitual character, there can be a discrepancy between the existence of a (social) convention and making it a part of an individual's behavioral habits. As I will clarify in what follows, this view can be challenged, in particular by defending the inherent social and cultural aspect of habits and their entanglement within normative practices.

8 As a growing body of research is clarifying, habits *per se* are not necessarily unintentional. They are compatible with the intentionality of action, provided that this is understood in non-intellectualistic terms. See Kalis, Ometto (2019), Hutto, Robertson (2020), Steiner (2020), Bertinetto, Grüneberg (2023a; 2023b).

9 For instance, the norm of saving patients' lives, to which physicians are, rightly and obviously, accustomed, may conflict with the conditions of a terminally ill person, in whose regard attempts to avoid death amount to therapeutic overkill and should be avoided in the name of another norm, which should be based on habitual respect for personal dignity (Delacroix [2022]).

10 E.g., on the validity of the habitual norm of keeping a patient alive in the case of a terminally ill patient.

11 Previous versions of this article were used for the talks I gave at the annual *Conference of the European Society of Aesthetics* in Tallinn (2022), and Humboldt Kolleg *Aesthetic Habits* (Turin, 2022), as well as in 2024 at a series of Japanese universities (Kanazawa, Waseda and Sophia in Tokyo, Sapporo, Osaka, and Kyoto) thanks to the generous support of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Sciences. I would like to thank those who participated in these events for their valuable comments, questions, criticisms, and suggestions.